

I work for a regional IT distribution company. I am the director of Business Development in that company, and also the Head of Technology Infrastructure in that company. I am also a qualified Advocate and Solicitor, called to the Singapore Bar Council, and am an external consultant for some local law firms for clarification of new technology and its impact on law from a business perspective. I write this on my own behalf and do not represent the views of my company.

I can get Spam within control
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My email address is probably more than 7 years old and also the designated target of several virtual mailboxes, therefore, I am the target of more than three hundred spam emails a day out of 375 total emails.

I defend myself against spam by using very cheap US\$15 software which is using, among other techniques, surprisingly sophisticated Bayesian algorithms to statistically determine what mail is spam from my preferences, my previous determination.

Though I am one of the worst affected human beings in Singapore, using this software, I am in control. Probably only people like Mr. Goh Chok Thong or Mr. George Bush get it worse than me. Fact of the matter is, I am a normal human being, and I can get it under control.

Why I think Anti-Spam legislation is the naive, irrelevant and dangerous
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Most of the spam I get is from the US, probably 95%. Local spam is rather detailed and from the original person selling something, and therefore, I do not quite consider it that irritating and possibly may be interested in the stuff they're selling, or it's probably news of my competitor's activities, and they often get 'unspammed' from my spambox so that I can read their activities in detail and find ways to compete against them.

I believe, and initial comments from government-related spokespeople have also vindicated my belief, that any anti-spam legislation only has the possibility of deterring local spammers and has absolutely no effect on foreign spammers.

So it does not solve 95% of my problem, actually. Therefore, it is irrelevant.

But it might deter local spammers. And here I come to my naive and dangerous part.

As you might understand the theory, if you send out a billion spams, virtually free of charge because the cost of the bandwidth divided by a billion, is virtually nothing, and get back 0.001% positive sales response, that is a wonderful and plausible business model. And the demand is sure to be there, because a billion emails is such a large number that a positive response is sure to happen.

As technology against spammers increases, the best of the spammers themselves counter the anti-spam technology by increasing their SMTP servers, by making worms which convert innocent, unrelated machines to be their zombies in the search for free bandwidth and un-blacklisted mailing machines. But since making other machines zombies is hardly legal, the spammers themselves now subcontract out the spamming to black hackers in countries like India and Russia, who have access to thousands of zombies each. In short, the spammers are now subcontracting out to the black hackers, and the crime is not so much spamming as zombie-fying.

In any case, the spammers are driven to find more and more sophisticated technology to counter the anti-spam effort, and are getting smarter and smarter every day.

Naively, the people who advocate antispam legislation do not understand that, Singapore may need to develop an elite squad of spammers for our future. We do not even understand superficially the positive uses of spam yet, and how powerful spam is from the marketing and propaganda perspective. We may need spammer squads and while the government should not positively encourage spammers, it should not make spamming illegal.

Envisage a future where everybody doesn't watch TV anymore and print media is extinct. Everybody has a soft foldable screen folded into their pocket, and this screen is semi-sentient and in folded form, responds to voice commands from its owner without a need to display anything to the owner unless visual data is required.

This is the future where Spam is the only way anybody can get a message to the public. This is the future that the population, each having a seriously powerful arsenal of anti-spam software are determined to live their lives without interference of anybody except the parties which their tunnel-vision thinking allows. Of course, Civil Defence alarms will be filtered out too, irritating as they are.

If the government invokes laws which turns our fledgling, primitive spammers into criminals, in this near future, we may be left behind to such a great extent that our competitors in neighbouring countries can market goods so much better than we can to their populations.

Let us let our spammers develop as much as they can or need to. Enacting laws which don't solve 95% of the problem, and eliminating 5% of the problem only, is irrelevant. And it is naive to underestimate the 'good' power of spam. And it is dangerous to enact an irrelevant and naive law which has questionable effect if it may affect the proper natural growth of our own spamming squads.

Lack of consistency
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From newspaper reports, the antispam legislation only affects email spammers.

For me the greatest time waster is printed spam mailers. Singapore Post guys put lots of spam into my 'locked HDB Mailbox' every day. Singtel accompanies my bill every month with spam brochures on their own product, Singapore Power bills come with spam of products 'not their own', Citibank bills come with Soo Kee jewelry spam. I spend tons of time trying to throw them away.

For cyberspam, I have sophisticated and capable software to eliminate spam. My maid I'm afraid has not the sophistication and capabilities of these software agents and I have to do it myself.

It seems easier and less dangerous to stop printed mail spam, why not test any antispam legislation on them first? Oh, because they are a valuable source of revenue for the postal company? Good answer, because cyber spam may one day become the valuable source of revenue for a future supercompany residing in Singapore.

How to solve the problem of spam
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The best of the best are already on this.

Emerging technology on increasing the CPU power required per email send and receive transaction to increase the cost of spam to bankrupt the spammers seem to be promising technology:

<http://www.discover.com/issues/jun-04/departments/emerging-technology/>

So what do we do while we wait for this implementation? Current antispam software is very smart, employ AI mechanisms to weed out spam, and is very effective. Use them.

So what is the government to do in the meantime? Please enforce the law. The main source of spam are zombies. Many servers in Singapore are zombies. Please enforce the law by locating zombies in Singapore and track who zombieified them. If they're foreign, then you pass on information to the ISP. If they're local, send some cops to their house and get those kids arrested. Spam is borderline illegal, zombieifying a machine is downright illegal and we're not in the business of creating a nation of criminals are we? So don't flame me for inconsistency, if you want an elite squad of hackers, put them in the SAF or some government agency and give them immunity. Don't let them develop in public.

IDA might also print leaflets on how not to attract spam, like don't put your email in your forum postings, don't put an email address out at your website, don't click on the 'unsubscribe' button, etc. You know the drill. It's really helpful, there're a lot of schmucks out there.

Oh as an additional service, after you located the zombie, please send a printed letter to the poor guy whose server got zombieified, that's not spam and he'd appreciate it.

On a final note, I hope you retrieved this mail among the millions of spam you might have received as you put this email address on your website.

cheers!

Michael Tan Yew Keong